The changing family structure

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

The family is a universal phenomenon, and the concept of the family is perhaps the most basic one in social life.

But families manifest themselves in widely different forms and functions. Perceptions of the role of the family vary among societies and cultures. There is no single view of the family, nor can there be a universally applicable definition. Indeed, one of the major attributes of the family is its diversity.

Instead of speaking of the family in the singular, it is often more appropriate to speak of "families", since the forms have varied within regions and through history, in accordance with changes in social, political and economic circumstances.

Historically, in most cultures the family has been patriarchal, or male-dominated. One example of the male-dominated family is the description of the family given in the Old Testament, where the male heads of the clan were allowed to have several wives as well as concubines. As a general rule, the women of the Old Testament had a rather low status.

In ancient Rome, the family was also patriarchal, but polygamy was not practised and women enjoyed a better status, although they still were not allowed to manage their own affairs. The Roman family was an extended one, and the patriarch had the authority even to kill his sons.

In medieval Europe, the family was influenced by the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and feudalism; it was generally extended and male-dominated. In contrast, Muslim women of the same period had considerable control over their own personal property.

The industrial revolution spawned great changes in family structure. Industrialization and urbanization led to the breakup of the large feudal estates and prompted a sharp change in life and working styles. Many people, especially unmarried youths, left the farms and went to the cities to work in the factories. This process led to the dissolution of many extended families.

At the same time, patriarchal rule slowly gave way to a greater equality between the sexes. Stereotyping of male and female roles within the family broke down. No longer was caring for the home and children the exclusive duty of women, nor earning a living and pursuing a public life the exclusive domain of men. Many wives started working outside the home, just as many husbands started sharing the duties involved in maintaining a household.

The changing family

This transformation of the structure of the family continues today, as families are undergoing rapid changes all over the world. Although such changes differ from region to region, there are some common traits: smaller nuclear families, the greater longevity of family members, and the transformation of relationships within the family due to changing values.

Other changes are under way. Formalized marriage is losing its status, and divorce has increased in almost all countries where it is attainable. It is estimated that one third of all families are now single-parent families headed by a woman.

Traditional definitions of family structure tended to be based on two major types—the nuclear and the extended family. But these are undergoing changes, while new family types are emerging.

In many countries the extended family is being replaced by the nuclear family, as societies become more and more industrialized and urbanized. And the nuclear family itself is changing, with the advances of equality between the sexes, new technologies facilitating child-bearing, and economic changes which provide women with independent sources of sustenance.

At the same time, non-traditional family types are becoming more and more common, such as cohabitation, same-gender relationships, single-parent families and reorganized families.

Nuclear families and cohabitation

Modern Western families tend to create the nuclear family, where two generations—parents and children—live together. Even if the children move out, the "empty nest" is still considered a nuclear family. Statistics show that the nuclear family is more common in countries where people's life expectancy is high.

Nuclear families are well suited for urbanized societies, since they can easily move and do not need large dwellings. While the nuclear family offers several advantages, the limited number of family members makes it vulnerable to internal and external pressures.

Cohabitation emerged in the 1970s from a more general change in social values—new attitudes not only towards marriage, but towards divorce, children born outside marriage and abortion. In Europe, for example, cohabitation without marriage has increased—at least before children are born.

Surveys suggest that cohabitation is chosen for a variety of reasons. Among the single, trial marriage or opposition to marriage is mentioned, as is refusal to make a long-term commitment. Among those previously married, cohabitation also occurs when a waiting period is needed to remarry, or when one of the partners does not wish a new legal commitment after a previous unhappy marriage.

Young adults up to age 25 represent the population group with the largest percentage of cohabiting women. The highest prevalence is found in Scandinavia: by the 1980s, 28 per cent of the women in the age group 20-24 in Norway, 37 per cent in Denmark and 44 per cent in Sweden were cohabiting. But in all countries for which data are available, substantial increases have also taken place among the older age groups.

Cohabitation can be a prelude to marriage. For instance, close to half of the couples marrying in the 1980s in the United States had previously lived together.

As more couples are cohabiting, births outside marriage are increasing. They represented 16 per cent of all births in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1988, 26 per cent in France in 1988, 27 per cent in the United Kingdom in 1989 and 47 per cent in Sweden in 1990.

Single-parent and polygamous families

Single-parent families are formed through the death of one spouse, divorce, separation, desertion or the decision by the partners not to live together. Such families differ greatly in their economic conditions, but often have more limited resources than two-parent families.

Single-parent families are mostly headed by a woman—indeed, one of every three households in the world has a woman as its sole breadwinner. But the number of male-headed single-parent families seems to be rising in the Western world. These have, in general, a better economic position than female-headed units. Female-headed families tend to be economically vulnerable, as the female wage-earner tends to receive lower pay.

Single-parent families need the support of the public authorities. Yet in most countries legal systems and policies lag behind societal changes, leading to a failure to support the needs of non-traditional families. The increase in single-parent families all over the world poses major challenges for policy makers.

In many societies, marriages are polygamous, providing for the marriage of a man to several women or, less commonly, the marriage of a woman to several men. Polygamy is, for instance, culturally accepted in much of Africa, where anyone can accede to it, if one has the economic means. In North Africa, about 7 per cent of all marriages are polygamous, and in central Africa the figure varies between 10 and 25 per cent. In West Africa polygamy involves about 30 per cent of women.

In some polygamous families, some or all of the wives (and sometimes the husbands) may not live with their spouse. Nor is the residence of the family necessarily the residence of the children. Sometimes there are several allied family units under the same head.

Extended families and kinship and tribal families

In many parts of the world, the family is the combination of several family "molecules", which together form an extended family. An extended family need not

be big: it is, for instance, small in the case of a grandparent and a grandchild living together. But usually the extended family refers to numerous people either living together or having frequent, intimate interaction.

A common form of extended family is the three-generation family, where grandparents, parents and children live together. Cultures that value respect and care for the elderly see the three-generation family as the most desirable form of the family.

Such a family often exists where the division of land and other property would diminish the economic possibilities of all family members. Thus, the three-generation form is more prevalent in rural areas.

The growing shortage of housing in cities has created a sort of forced extended family, as many young couples have no choice but to live with their parents. In such cases, the tendency is to view a household as containing two nuclear families, which break up when separate dwellings become possible.

Extended families used to be prevalent in the countryside, and nuclear families in the cities. But a reversal seems to be taking place in many parts of the world. The countryside is becoming increasingly nuclear, as the productive limits of subdivided land reduce the capacity of large families to support themselves. And cities increasingly consist of extended family units, drawn together as a survival strategy in the face of deteriorating economies and lack of individual opportunity.

Kinship families consist of even larger units. In addition to three generations, other relatives (such as uncles, aunts and cousins) may belong to the same household.

In some Western countries, instead of marrying, people may choose to live in a mutual-support community, where several nuclear families and single persons live together. There are also households of couples or small groups of women who care for the children of one or more of them.

On an even broader scale, tribal families are usually built on a social rather than a biological basis. Responsibility for the care of children may be taken up by several people. The biological mother's sisters may be called mothers, and the father's brothers may be responsible for serving as father to the children. All cousins are often called sisters and brothers. This type of family rarely neglects children, because there is an abundance of parents.

Reorganized families and migrant families

In all forms of families, reorganizations can occur through the marriage, remarriage or cohabitation of persons who had children by former partners.

There are several forms of remarriage or cohabitation under common law. One spouse or both spouses may have children who may or may not live with them. The spouses may or may not have children together. In this way, children can have several half-sisters and half-brothers, "half-grandparents" and other non-biological relatives.

Owing to the prevailing rates of marriage, remarriage and cohabitation, the reorganized family is for some observers the most important new family group in many societies.

The 1980s have seen the resurgence of international migration. Among the traditional countries of immigration, the United States admitted more than 3 million permanent immigrants between 1985 and 1989. In Europe, the 12 member States of the European Community were estimated to be hosting over 13 million foreigners, nearly 60 per cent of whom originated outside the Community. Millions of foreigners, mainly from southern and south-eastern Asia, were working in the oil-producing States of the Persian Gulf.

On the whole, as many as 70 million people are working (legally or illegally) in countries other than their own. In addition, thousands of families have been forced out of their countries by wars or persecution. As a result, migrant families are more and more common. Such families have to shoulder the burden of cultural change, difficult processes of adjustment, and rapidly transformed interpersonal relations within the family.

But the migrant family is also a powerful example of the family as a source of identity; as a place of intimacy and emotional nourishment; and as a provider of support in times of crisis. The migrant family is a testimony to the importance of the family in today's world.

Vital and resilient

These profound changes in family structure may be seen as a sign of decline; but despite the many pressures and challenges it has faced, the institution of the family has shown remarkable vitality and resilience. Rather than indicating an erosion of the worth of the family, new forms of family life are developing to meet

the challenges of the modern world, and are struggling to find more effective ways of balancing individual rights and social responsibilities.

The variety in family structure has often been stressed by the United Nations. For instance, in its 1991 resolution on the International Year of the Family, the United Nations General Assembly recognized "the existence of various concepts of the family in different socio-political and cultural systems".

Indeed, promoting an accurate understanding of families among Governments, policy makers and the public is one of the objectives of the International Year of the Family.

Forms of families

Nuclear	Extended	Reorganized
Biological	Three-generation	Remarried
Social	Kinship	Community living
One-parent	Tribal	Same-gender [a]
Adoptive [b]	Polygamous [a]	
In vitro [a]		

[a] Legal status in only a limited number of countries.
[b] In countries where legal adoption is recognized.

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